



## On Refusal to Judge Our Neighbor

*by St. Dorotheos of Gaza*

If we remember the saying of the holy fathers, brothers, and put them into practice all the time, it will be difficult for us to neglect ourselves. For if, as they used to say, we do not despise little things and think they are of no consequence to us, we shall not fall into great and grievous things. I am always telling you that bad habits are formed in the soul by these very small things—when we say, 'What does this or that matter,'—and it is the first step to despising great things. You know how great a wrong it is to judge your neighbor. What is graver than this? What does God hate and turn away from so much as from this? As the fathers say, what is worse than judging rashly? [1] Nevertheless, from things that appear negligible a man comes to such great evil. For by accepting a suspicion against the neighbor, by saying, 'What does it matter if I put in a word [about my suspicion]? What does it matter if I find out what this brother is saying or what that guest is doing?' the mind begins to forget about its own sins and to talk idly about his neighbor, speaking evil against him, despising him, and from this he falls into the very thing that he condemns. Because we become careless about our own faults and do not lament our own death (as the Fathers put it), [2] we lose the power to correct ourselves and we are always at work on our neighbor. Nothing angers God so much or strips a man so bare or carries him so effectively to his ruin as calumniating, condemning, or despising his neighbor.

There are three distinct things here: running a man down; condemning him unjustly; and despising him. Running a man down is saying that so-and-so has told a lie, or got into a rage, or gone whoring, or the like. A man has already committed calumny if he speaks about his brother's sins as if with sympathy. Condemning a man is saying, 'he is a

wicked liar, or he is an angry man, or he is a fornicator. For in this way one judges the condition of his soul and draws a conclusion about his whole life, saying it is of such a kind and condemns him as such. This is a very serious thing. For it is one thing to say, 'He got mad', and another thing to say, 'He is bad-tempered', and to reveal, as we said, the whole disposition of his life. It is serious to judge a man for each one of his sins. As Christ himself says, 'Hypocrite, first take the board from your own eye, then you can see to take the splinter out of your brother's eye.' [3]

You see, he compares your brother's sin to a splinter and your rash judgment to a board. Very nearly the most difficult of all sins to deal with is judging our neighbor! That Pharisee who was praying and giving thanks to God for his [own] good works was not lying but speaking the truth, and he was not condemned for that. For we must give thanks to God when we are worthy to do something good, as he is then working with us and helping us. Because of this he was not condemned, as I said, not even because he said, 'I am not like other men', but [he was condemned] because he said, 'I am not like this tax-collector'. [4] It was then that he made a judgment. He condemned a person and the dispositions of his soul—to put it shortly, his whole life. Therefore, the tax-collector rather than the Pharisee went away justified.

Nothing is more serious, nothing more difficult to deal with, as I say repeatedly, than judging and despising our neighbor. Why do we not rather judge ourselves and our own wickedness which we know so accurately and about which we have to render an account to God? Why do we usurp God's right to judge? Why should we demand a reckoning from his creature, his servant? Ought we not to be afraid when we hear about a brother falling into fornication said, 'He has acted wickedly!' If you know what it says about this in the Book of the Ancients, it would make you shudder. For an angel brought [Isaac the Theban] the soul of someone who had fallen into sin, and said to him, 'Here is the person you have judged. He has just died. Where do you order him to be put, into the Kingdom or into eternal punishment?', [5] Can you imagine a more terrible situation to be in? What else could the angel mean by these words than, 'Since you want to be the judge of the just and the unjust, what do you command for this poor soul? Is he to be spared or to be punished?' The holy old man, frightened beyond measure, spent the rest of his life praying with sighs and tears and continuous hard work to be forgiven this sin, and this in spite of having fallen on his knees before the angel and been forgiven, for the angel said to him, 'You see, God has shown you how serious a thing it is to judge; you must never do it again.' [6] This was the way he granted forgiveness but the soul of the old man would not allow him to be completely comforted from his pain and repentance until he died.

Why are we so ready to judge our neighbor? Why are we so concerned about the burden of others? We have plenty to be concerned about, each one has his own debt and his own sins. It is for God alone to judge, to justify or to condemn. He knows the state of each one of us and our capacities, our deviations, and our gifts, our constitution and our preparedness, and it is for him to judge each of these things according to the knowledge that he alone has. For God judges the affairs of a bishop in one way and those of a prince in another. His judgment is for an abbot or for a disciple, he judges differently the senior and the neophyte, the sick man and the healthy man. Who could understand all these judgments except the one who has done everything, formed everything, knows everything? I remember once hearing the following story: a slave ship put in at a certain port where there lived a holy virgin who was in earnest about her spiritual life. When she learned about the arrival of the ship she was glad, for she wanted to buy a small serving maid for herself. She thought to herself, 'I will take her into my home and bring her up in my way of life so that she knows nothing of the evils of the world.' So she sent and enquired of the master of the ship and found that he had two small girls who he thought would suit her. Whereupon she gladly paid the price and took one of the children into her house. The ship's master went away. He had not gone very far when there met him the leader of a dancing troupe who saw the other small girl with him and wanted to buy her; the price was agreed and paid, and he took her away with him. Now take a look at God's mystery; see what his judgment was. Which of us could give any judgment about this case? The holy virgin took one of these little ones to bring her up in the fear of God, to instruct her in every good work, to teach her all that belongs to the monastic state and all the sweetness of holy commandments of God. The other unfortunate child was taken for the dancing troupe, to be trained in the works of the devil. What effect would teaching her this orgiastic dancing have, but the ruin of her soul? What can we have to say about this frightful judgment? Here were two little girls taken away from their parents by violence. Neither knew where they came from; one is found in the hands of God and the other falls into the hands of the devil. Is it possible to say that what God asks from the one he asks also from the other? Surely not! Suppose they both fell into fornication or some other deadly sin; is it possible that they both face the same judgment or that their fall is the same? How does it appear to the mind of God when one learns about the Judgment and about the Kingdom of God day and night, while the other unfortunate knows nothing of it, never hears anything good but only the contrary, everything shameful, everything diabolical? How can he allow them to be examined by the same standard?

Wherefore a man can know nothing about the judgments of God. He alone is the one who takes account of all and is able to judge the hearts of each one of us, as he alone is our Master. Truly it happens that a man may do a certain thing (which seems to be wrong) out of simplicity, and there may be something about it which makes more

amends to God than your whole life; how are you going to sit in judgment and constrict your own soul? And should it happen that he has fallen away, how do you know how much and how well he fought, how much blood he sweated before he did it? Perhaps so little fault can be found in him that God can look on his action as if it were just, for God looks on his labor and all the struggle he had before he did it, and has pity on him. And you know this, and what God has spared him for, are you going to condemn him for, and ruin your own soul? And how do you know what tears he has shed about it before God? You may well know about the sin, but you do not know about the repentance.

But there are times when we not only condemn but also despise a man; for it is one thing to condemn and quite another to despise, as I have said. Contempt adds to condemnation the desire to set someone at nought—as if the neighbor were a bad smell which has to be got rid of as something disgusting, and this is worse than rash judgment and exceedingly destructive.

Those who want to be saved scrutinize not the shortcomings of their neighbor but always their own and they set about eliminating them. Such was the man who saw his brother doing wrong and groaned, 'Woe is me; him today—me tomorrow!' You see his caution? You see the preparedness of his mind? How he swiftly foresaw how to avoid judging his brother? When he said 'me tomorrow' he aroused his fear of sinning, and by this he increased his caution about avoiding those sins which he was likely to commit, and so he escaped judging his neighbor; and he did not stop at this, but put himself below his brother, saying, 'He has repented for his sin but I do not always repent. I am never first to ask for forgiveness and I am never completely converted.' Do you see the divine light in his soul? Not only was he able to escape making judgment but he humiliated himself as well. And we miserable fellows judge rashly, we hate indiscriminately and set people at nought whether we see something, or hear something, or even only suspect something! And what is worse, we do not let it stop at harming ourselves, but we go and look for another brother and say, 'Here is what happened!' We harm him and put sin into his heart also and we do not fear the saying, 'Woe to the man who gives his neighbor something dark and dangerous to drink!' But we do the devil's work and are not one bit concerned about it. What else has the devil to do but knock us down and harm us? We are found to work with him for our own destruction and that of our neighbor, for a man who harms his own soul is working with, and helping, the devil. The man who seeks to profit his soul is co-operating with the angels.

How can we put up with these things unless it is because we have no true love? If we have true love with sympathy and patient labor, we shall not go about scrutinizing our neighbor's shortcomings. As it is said, 'Love covers up a multitude of sins', [7] and

again, 'Love thinks no evil ... hides everything,' etc. [8] As I said, if we have true love, that very love should screen anything of this kind, as did the saints when they saw the shortcomings of men. Were they blind? Not at all! But they simply would not let their eyes dwell on sins. Who hated sin more than the saints? But they did not hate the sinners at the same time, nor condemn them, nor turn away from them, but they suffered with them, admonished them, comforted them, gave them remedies as sickly members, and did all they could to heal them. Take a fisherman: when he casts his hook into the sea and a large fish takes the bait, he perceives first that the fish struggles violently and is full of fight, so he does not try to pull it in immediately by main force for the line would break and the catch would be lost in the end. No! He plays out the line

and, as he says, allows the fish to run freely, but when he feels the line slacken and the first struggles have calmed down, he takes up the slack line and begins, little by little, to draw him in. So the holy fathers, by patience and love, draw the brother and do not spurn him nor show themselves unfriendly towards him, but as a mother who has an unruly son does not hate him or turn away from him but rules him with sweetness and sometimes does things to please him, so they always protect him and keep him in order and they gain a hold on him so that with time they correct the erring brother and do not allow him to harm anyone else, and in doing so they greatly advance towards the love of Christ. What did the blessed Ammon do when those brothers, greatly disturbed, came to him and said, 'Come and see, Father. There is a young woman in brother X's cell!' [9] What tenderness he showed to the erring brother. What great love there was in that great soul. Knowing that the brother had hidden the woman in a large barrel, he went in, sat down on it, and told the others to search the whole place. And when they found nothing he said to them, 'May God forgive you!' And so dismissing them in disgrace, he called out to them that they should not readily believe anything against their neighbor. By his consideration for his brother he not only protected him after God but corrected him when the right moment came. For when they were alone he laid on him the hand with which he had thrown the others out, and said, 'Have a care for yourself, brother'. Immediately the other's conscience pricked him and he was stricken with remorse, so swiftly did the mercy and sympathy of the old man work upon his soul.

Let us, therefore, strive to gain this love for ourselves, let us acquire this tenderness towards our neighbor so that we may guard ourselves from wickedly speaking evil of our neighbor, and from judging and despising him. Let us help one another, as we are members one of another. Which of us, having a wound on his hand or foot, or any other member, would despise it and cut it off, even if it turned septic? Would he not rather bathe it and take away the poison and put a plaster on it, sign it with the cross, apply a relic, and pray and beg the saints to pray for its cure, as Abbot Zosimos used to say [10]—to put it simply, not to turn aside or run away from our own members even those

of bad reputation but to do all we can to cure their disease. In this way we ought to bear one another's burdens, to help one another and be helped by others who are stronger than ourselves, to think of everything and do everything that can help ourselves and others, for we are members one of another,' as the Apostle says. If we are one body each is a member of the other. If one member suffers, all the others suffer with it. [12] What does our 'cenobia', our community life mean to you? Do you not reckon that we are one body, and all members of one another? Those in charge are the head; those who supervise and correct are the eyes; those entrusted with instruction are the mouth; those who listen and obey are the ears; those who do the work are the hands; those who run messages, who have outside ministries, are the feet. Are you the head? Fulfill your charge. Are you the eyes? Be in touch and consider. Are you the mouth? Speak and give help. Are you the ear? Listen. The hand? Work. The foot? Do your errands! Let each one give assistance to the body according to his ability and take care to help one another, whether it is a matter of teaching and putting the word of God into the heart of a brother, or of consoling him in time of trouble or of giving a hand with work and helping him. In a word, as I was saying, each one according to his means should take care to be at one with everyone else, for the more one is united to his neighbor the more he is united to God.

And now I give you an example from the Fathers. Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The centre point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. Now concentrate your minds on what is to be said! Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the centre; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the centre are the lives of men. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God. Now consider in the same context the question of separation; for when they stand away from God and turn to external things, it is clear that the more they recede and become distant from God, the more they become distant from one another. See! This is the very nature of love. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbor. If we were to love God more, we should be closer to God, and through love of him we should be more united in love to our neighbor; and the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God. May God make us worthy to listen to what is fitting for us and do it. For in the measure that we pay attention and take care to carry out what we hear, God will always enlighten us and make us understand his will.

## Endnotes

1. Apo Nau 97: ROC (1907) 402.
2. Apo Moses 18; PG 65: 289; CS 59: (2) 119, Apo Poemen 6; PG 65:320D; CS 59: 139.
3. Lk 6:42.
4. Lk 18: 11.
5. Apo Isaac; PG 65:240; CS 59: 93.
6. Ibid.
7. 1 P 4:8.
8. 1 Cor 13:5-6.
9. Apo Ammonas 10; PG 65:121; PO 11:408; CS 59:24.
10. Zosimos, PE 2, 37: 119. Cf. PG 78:1693A.
11. Rom 12:5.
12. 1 Cor 12:26.

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